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ABSTRACT

It is evident that, when dialect similarity exists between speakers and listeners, listeners tend to be more accepting of the speakers than when there is a difference in dialect. In order to ascertain the effects on listeners of the dialects of Ford and Carter in the 1976 presidential debates, a questionnaire was administered to 252 students who attended the University of Alabama, the University of Texas, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Immediatly prior to the first debate, students were asked to indicate candidate preference; after the first and third debates, they were asked to indicate candidate preference, judge which candidate had won the debates, and tell whether each candidate's dialect was similar to or unlike their own. Analysis of the results indicated that respondents who perceived their own dialects to be similar to Ford's and unlike Carter's favored Ford in greater proportion than the overall Ford-Carter ratio, but that Carter failed to gain similarity advantages in a proportion approaching Ford's. (GW)

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PERCEPTIONS OF CANDIDATES' DIALECTS IN THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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PERCEPTIONS OF CANDIDATES' DIALECTS
IN THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

During the period of the 1976 presidential debates, the suggestion was raised in the popular press that listeners' perceptions of, and attitudes toward the dialect of a speaker could affect debate outcomes. While researchers' attentions have not heretofore focused upon sociolinguistic variables in speech events such as these, a conceptual framework for examining them is evolving. Interest in dialect influences of presidential candidates seems justified by past sociolinguistic research.

It is axiomatic that speech carries with it social information about the speaker's regional and social origin. In the extreme case of speaker and hearer who do not understand the same languages, social meanings attached to the speaker's origins often constitute barriers to effective communication and social interaction. These barriers have counterparts in interaction involving speakers of different dialects of the same language.

In a study of language conflicts and political community, Inglehart and Woodward[1] observed that separate languages are frequently confined within separate political entities. Where this is not the case, language may form the basis of political divisiveness. Such divisiveness is especially strong if one language community is excluded from social mobility, as in Canada, Belgium and sections of the United States.

Regardless of the variety of accommodation to linguistic differences, code items gradually become shared between speakers

of formerly distinct languages or dialects. One effect of this sharing appears to be a sort of homophily based upon the similarity of language use between speaker and hearer. However, even between members of a relatively homogeneous language community, there can remain a residue, perhaps as faint as an intuition, of speech foreignness. This perceived foreignness apparently provides the impetus for stereotypical impressions of the speaker's socio-intellectual status.[2] Interestingly, hearers also appear to make negative judgments of the aesthetic quality of the speech of those who do not use the prestigious language or dialect, although Giles, Bourhis, Trudgill and Lewis[3] found that listeners who were unfamiliar with which of two dialects was the prestigious form could not identify the dialect of alleged aesthetic superiority. Regardless of the grounds for attaching these kinds of judgments to speech, many citizens of the United States hold unfavorable stereotypes toward speakers of certain regional and social dialects.

This set of language attitudes has been shown to affect speakers' employability for supervisory and executive positions[4] and achievement in school,[5] as well as their performance in a variety of other settings. The reader may intuit a circularity in the dynamics of dialectal influences; cultural and social differences lead to judgments of the desirability of the speaker's origins which lead to social and cultural differences. Awareness of such patterns seems important in light of present attempts to eradicate inequality of opportunity in employment and education.

Apparently, those speakers who accommodate their language to the preferred form achieve greater social acceptance. The co-variance of dialectal accommodation and social acceptance is reported in a study by Giles and Bourhis[6] which showed that Black West Indian migrants to England who accommodated their speech to local working-class dialects spoken in their neighborhoods found more social acceptance than those who failed to make such accommodation. Whatever may be the systemic relationships between dialect similarity and listener acceptance of speakers, it is evident that these two variables commonly co-occur in interpersonal communication. Apparently, listeners judge themselves to be similar to the dialect-similar speaker in other ways, promoting positive affect. There is anecdotal evidence that this same phenomenon may work in listeners' perceptions of the speech of political candidates.

In the 1976 presidential campaign, a commonly repeated joke in the South revolved around the possibility of electing a president who did not have an accent. This joke suggests that dialect influences may be important variables in presidential debate outcomes. It points to two dialect-related disadvantages that Carter faced in the debates. First, more debate observers (and hence voters) probably considered themselves similar to Ford in dialect than to Carter. Second, the predominant folk view in the United States holds that Southern regional dialects sound nonstandard, and are socially less desirable than Midwestern speech. Even many Southerners share this view.

The presidential debates did not present an opportunity to explore dialect influences in a controlled fashion resembling Lambert's matched guise.[7] However, since the presidential debates represented the confluence of many lines of interest in dialectal influences, they seemed too important to be disregarded for lack of experimental control. The research reported here was confined to perceptions of the candidates' dialects, judgments of who won each debate, and preferences of listeners for one over the other candidate. No attempt was made to account for the successful campaign of Carter or the defeat of President Ford. The research was designed to test the following hypotheses:

1. If a debate viewer perceives one candidate's dialect to be similar to his or her own, and the other candidate's to be different, the viewer will tend to prefer the dialect-similar candidate. This preference will also affect the viewer's judgment of which candidate won each debate.
2. Ford could be expected to derive greater benefit from dialect-similarity than Carter, since his speech shows Midwest regional features while Carter's exhibits Southern regional features. Carter's perceived similarity advantages might be outweighed by perceived nonstandardness disadvantages. The difference between the dialect similarity benefits enjoyed by these candidates could be taken as some indication of the relative importance of similarity and standardness.

Method

As part of a survey of college students at a number of state-supported universities, the researchers collected responses from students at three times: September 22, 1976 (the day before debate 1); September 24 (the day after debate 1); and October 25 (three days after the final debate). Data from 252 students' responses are reported here. The students, who were undergraduates enrolled in lower division communication courses, attended the University of Alabama (88), the University of Texas at Austin (91), and the University of Wisconsin at Madison (73). This sample was obtained by omitting from consideration those respondents who did not complete all three surveys. Surveys were pencil-and-paper instrument administered during class time and taking 5-10 minutes to complete. Anonymity was guaranteed, and participation was voluntary. Responses from different surveys were paired using items which requested street numbers from permanent addresses.

This report concentrates upon three variables in the survey: (1) An indicator of candidate preference ("If the election were held today, for whom would you vote?"). Choices included Ford, Carter, and Other, but no particular others were specified, nor was there a choice labeled "undecided." (2) An indicator of who won each debate (a standoff alternative was provided). (3) Two items which indicated dialect similarity, one asking whether each candidate's dialect was similar to or unlike the respondant's.

Item one appeared on all three surveys. Items two and three appeared only on the two post-debate surveys.

The researchers examined the composition of the student sample for the presence of important variables other than those captured by the items above. Several were considered: It was found that only eighty-three percent of the students watched the first debate, and only fifty percent watched the final debate. However, no important differences were discovered between those who watched and those who did not. All data are included in this report, as this gives the most reasonable approximation of the university population.

In the same vein, the students sampled generally preferred Ford, by almost a two-to-one margin in the final survey. Since we were interested in relative frequencies, this appeared to be of little importance.

Finally, although we were on the alert for differences between native residents of Alabama, Texas and Wisconsin and non-natives, no such differences became apparent. A large number of subjects rating themselves dialect-similar to both candidates appeared in all three states, although perceived dialect-similarity varied much more by region for Carter than for Ford. Table 1 displays perceived dialect similarity for each state.

Insert Table 1 About Here

TABLE 1

Perceived Dialect Similarities In Each State

(September 24 Survey)

	Ford		Carter	
	Similar	Unlike	Similar	Unlike
Wisconsin	43	27	12	59
Alabama	41	45	54	33
Texas	33	55	22	66
Missing Responses	8		6	

Results and Discussion

As predicted, those respondants who perceived themselves to be similar to Ford in dialect and different from Carter favored Ford in greater proportion than the overall Ford-Carter ratio of nearly two-to-one. Among this group, 73% favored Ford at the time of the pretest, 78% after the first debate and 82% after the final debate. As shown in Table 2, the candidates ran even in the judgments of the other three groups, including the group which perceived itself similar to Carter and unlike Ford. The judgments of which candidate won each debate are displayed in Table 3. Ford shows a distinct advantage among those who perceived themselves like Ford and unlike Carter. (Here the standoff option intervenes, but ignoring these responses, Ford captured this group by seven-to-one after the first debate and two-to-one after the last debate.)

The second hypothesis concerned the degree to which perceived nonstandardness of Carter's speech might offset similarity advantages. Among respondants who perceived themselves to be similar to Carter and unlike Ford, Carter was slightly preferred at the time of the pretest and after the first debate, and ran slightly less than even in the final accounting.[8] Carter clearly failed to gain similarity advantages in proportion approaching Ford's. This pattern is duplicated in winner judgments.

Insert Table 2 and Table 3 About Here

TABLE 2

Candidate-Preference by Dialect Similarity

	Pretest	After First Debate	After Last Debate	Changes
Similar to Both	6[a]	7	11	+4
	6	5	6	0
Similar to Ford, Unlike Carter	22	23	28	+6
	8	6	6	-2
Similar to Carter, Unlike Ford	12	11	7	-4
	10	11	9	-1
Unlike Both	15	14	11	-4
	10	10	8	-3
Missing Responses[b]	11	13	14	
Total Percent	100	100	100	

[a]The top number of each pair indicates the percent of total subjects preferring Ford. The bottom number in the pair indicates the percent of total subjects preferring Carter.

[b]Percentage of missing responses includes items left blank and votes for third party candidates.

TABLE 3

Debate Winner by Dialect Similarity

	Ford	Standoff	Carter	Ford	Standoff	Carter
Similar to Both	6[a]	3	3	3	6	4
Similar to Ford, Unlike Carter	16	12	2	10	13	5
Similar to Carter, Unlike Ford	8	9	5	2	8	4
Unlike Both	8	11	4	3	8	6
Missing Responses		13			28	
Total Percent		100			100	

[a]Each number represents percentage share of total survey for each debate.

The above results suggest that if the speech of two candidates differs in regional dialect features, each candidate will enjoy an advantage among listeners who perceive their dialect to be similar to that candidate and different from the other; but this advantage seems to be enjoyed only by a candidate who speaks a dialect of high social prestige. In the 1976 debates, Ford enjoyed such an advantage; Carter did not. Of course it is possible that our results only hold for Ford and Carter, or only for the student populations surveyed. Tests on several other candidates, with other populations, are warranted before the more general proposition stated in this paragraph can be asserted with confidence.

Footnotes

[1]R. F. Inglehart and M. Woodward, "Language Conflicts and the Political Community," in P. Giglioli (ed.) Language and Social Context. London: Penguin, 1972.

[2]Joyce F. Buck, "The Effects of Negro and White Dialectal Variations Upon Attitudes of College Students," Speech Monographs 35 (1968), 181-186; Wallace E. Lamber, "A Social Psychology of Bilingualism," Journal of Social Issues 23 (1967), 91-107; Anthony Mulac, T. D. Hanley, and D. Y. Prigge, "Effects of Speech Foreignness Upon Three Dimensions of Attitude of Selected American Listeners," Quarterly Journal of Speech 60 (1974), 411-420.

[3]Howard Giles, Richard Y. Bourhis, P. Trudgill, and A. Lewis, "The Imposed Norm Hypothesis: A Validation," Quarterly Journal of Speech 60 (1974), 405-410.

[4]Robert Hopper and Frederick Williams, "Speech Characteristics and Employability," Speech Monographs 40 (1973), 296-302.

[5]Frederick Williams and Associates. Explorations in the Linguistic Attitudes of Teachers. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1976.

[6]Howard Giles and Richard Y. Bourhis, "Voice and Racial Categorization in Britain," Communication Monographs 43 (1976), 108-114.

[7]Lambert, 1967.

[8]The number of respondants judging themselves similar to both candidates and similar to Ford increased, while those judging themselves similar to Carter, or unlike Ford, or unlike both decreased. These changes are consistent with the explanations advanced in this essay.